



*Natick Recreation and Parks Department*

*"CREATE COMMUNITY THROUGH PEOPLE, PARKS & PROGRAMS"*

# *Natick Recreation & Parks Stewardship Program*



A Guide for Beginning and Sustaining Park Friends Groups



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## PREFACE

This document is the initial Friends Group Toolkit created by Natick Recreation & Parks (NRP). It aims to provide current and potential park stewards with important information on how to begin and grow their stewardship ('Friends') group. It is a living document that will continually evolve to meet the needs of our park volunteers.

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### What is a “friends group”?

Friends groups are community-based volunteer groups that are officially affiliated with *Natick Recreation & Parks*. These recognized volunteer groups are primarily established to support and advocate for a specific park in the Natick Park system. Friends groups work in close partnership with the staff at Natick Recreation & Parks (NRP) and Natick Public Works to create welcoming community green spaces and positive experiences with nature at the neighborhood level. Successful Friends groups also engage with community residents and external partners to achieve these goals serving as the “community voice” for the park. Typical Friends group activities include: park cleanup and beautification days, organizing recreational and educational programming, advocating for park improvements, and publicizing important park issues.

Natick Recreation & Parks is looking to launch this program in 2016 thanks to valuable input from residents and the dedicated efforts of local civic organizations and businesses. Friends groups can be of varying capacity, ranging from large 501 (c)3 organizations to grassroots community entities consisting of a smaller number of committed neighbors. They can be part of a civic or business partnership. NRP is supportive of all civic engagement and actively works with groups to provide service, resources and training.

Natick Recreation & Parks is committed to preserving and enhancing public green space throughout Natick, which we believe can only be achieved through sustained civic engagement and park stewardship.



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### The value of stewardship – why friends groups exist

Parks provide significant aesthetic, economic, environmental and social benefits to the Town of Natick and committed citizens are increasingly becoming involved in park stewardship. Natick's beautiful public spaces are available to everyone and are enjoyed on a daily basis by hundreds of residents and visitors. This level of usage and the number of parks presents the challenge of keeping Natick's Parks "safe, clean and ready to use." Park Stewards, more commonly known as "friends" groups, are essential to the health, cleanliness and vitality of Natick's Parks. Friends groups invest time and resources to create healthy and welcoming green spaces that connect neighbors, build community identity and provide positive experiences. Through service projects, fun events, and commitment, friends groups enhance their community's quality of life through their neighborhood parks.

### How can I start a friends group?

The first step in forming new Friends group or re-activating a dormant group is to contact the *Recreation & Parks Department*. We will readily assist you in forming a Friends group.

Recreation & Parks

Tel: (508) 647 – 6530

[Email: recreation@natickma.gov](mailto:recreation@natickma.gov)

NRP staff will guide you through the formation process, beginning with a meeting to discuss your goals for the park. Together, we will plan your next steps, including a meeting to engage the broader community. We will also officially register your group once you fill out and submit the 'Natick Friends Group Annual Registration Form'.



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### Gathering Community Input

Understanding the needs of the park in combination with the needs of your community is an essential element in creating a friends group. Community members who already frequent the park are a good place to start building your initial "core" friends group membership.

It is also important to reach out to the broader community in order to have an inclusive perspective and ensure your group's goals are in line with other community development efforts. You can do this either through a community meeting, a neighborhood survey, or both. Please make sure you share all information with the Recreation & Parks Department so together, we can assess the information and establish next steps.

#### Quick tips for holding community meetings:

- > Choose a central space within the community, such as a community building or school, and make sure the meeting is timed to fit people's work schedules.
- > Use a variety of methods to spread the word about your meeting—post flyers in community buildings, coffee shops, grocery stores, laundry mats, etc.. If possible have it announced in the local newspaper. Online social media (such as facebook and twitter) can also be effective.
- > Reach out to other community groups to let them know about your meeting and ask them to spread the word to their members.
- > Create a clear list of the park issues your group wants to address.
- > Have a "solutions" brainstorming session for the group with guidelines to ensure that everyone is respectful, and encourage everyone to practice active listening when others are speaking.
- > Take notes! It's the best way to remember all the great ideas that will come out of the meeting.
- > Have a sign-up sheet so the meeting notes/minutes can be shared with all in attendance. This can also serve as a recruitment list for future members of the friends group.
- > Announce the date for the next friends group meeting, letting people know future dates (for meetings, events, service days) allows them to fit it into their own schedule and let other folks know when they can be involved!
- > Recreation & Parks can provide you with a short history of the park and any relevant media attention the park has received to spark meeting attendee's interest.

#### Quick tips for a neighborhood survey:

- > Make your questions concise to avoid a lengthy survey that might deter people, and make your questions fair so people feel comfortable answering honestly.
- > Devise a clear system to collect and analyze the responses. Having a simple report format is an easy way to see the overall survey trends.
- > Encourage respondents to attend future friends group meetings so they can voice their opinions in person. Include the scheduled date for your next meeting, or pick a standing date (ie: 3rd Wednesday of the month at 7 pm).
- > Provide survey results to all persons/households that were requested to complete the survey.



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### Writing your Mission Statement

The group mission statement is a product of focused community meetings. It is an easy and effective way to communicate the purpose of your friends group, both to the community you serve as well as the town as a whole. The mission statement is a group effort and an assurance that all your "friends" are in agreement when it comes to the purpose and goals of the group.

Here are two fictitious examples of friends groups' mission statements:

#### Murphy Park United

Murphy Park United is an association of friends, neighbors and an organization dedicated to making Murphy Park the best and most welcoming park it can be.

#### Friends of Grove Park

The mission of the Friends of Grove Park is to preserve the natural beauty and wildness of the Park and stimulate public interest therein.

Both of these statements are concise, express the purpose of the friends group, and help keep their work in-line with the defined goals. Answering the following questions will help simplify your mission statement construction process.

1. **Purpose.** What are the opportunities or needs you want to address?
2. **Business.** How will you address those opportunities or needs?
3. **Values.** What principles or beliefs guide your work?
4. **Goals.** Does the mission statement incorporate both short- and long-term goals?
5. **Actions.** Will the future actions of the group reflect the words of the mission statement?





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### How do we plan our first project?

Although the work you do is informed by the community, the planning will fall to the core friends group working in coordination with Natick Recreation & Parks and Natick Public Works. Examples of your first project could be a cleanup workday, a community program or a physical improvement project. A successful event takes time and substantial planning so the sooner you begin the better! The following sections will provide greater depth on some project ideas.

Start small and do it well – having one small successful project is better than multiple half-completed projects. Most importantly, make sure *everyone* in the community knows about the project! Even if only a third of the people you tell actually come to the event, you are still getting the word out about your friends group and the goals you are working to accomplish.

### Service Days

Service days are essential because they keep the park beautiful and are an opportunity to engage with your fellow community members. Everyone benefits from a clean, safe park, and everyone's help is needed to keep your park in that condition! The more frequent your service-days are the more in-depth your projects can be.

Service Days should be planned well in advance to provide volunteers plenty of notice to allow your group organizers time to secure tools and materials.

Use the Volunteer Service Day Sign-In form to capture your volunteers' contact information. Add all new volunteers to your general membership email list so they will receive future notice about service days, events and friends group meetings. Volunteers can fill many roles for the group. Identifying a range of activities will allow volunteers more opportunities to be involved. Some examples include picking up trash, tending a garden, staffing the welcome table, supplying refreshments or updating your Facebook page. It is important to document the impact of your work.

Volunteers will be more willing to come back if the impact of their work is tangible – We picked up how many bags of trash? We filled how many bags of leaves? -- and appreciated. Use your email list to inform volunteers what we accomplished during the service day. Never underestimate the value of a heartfelt "thank you" at the end of the day. Be sure to acknowledge everyone's hard work and let them know how much they have done to help the park. Taking it a step further, some friends groups plan an annual "thank you" event for their members as a time to get together without working. One example: a group pizza party in your park. Keep in mind that, like you, volunteers willingly contribute their free time to the park. The more thanks and information they receive from you the more likely they are to stay involved.



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### Prior to Service Day:

- > Conduct a park inventory to identify the highest priority projects. Make a list of all the necessary tools and materials you will need and decide how you will secure the supplies.
- > Contact NRP to discuss a date, time and scope of your service day so that we can arrange to support your efforts as resources allow, ie: schedule a trash pick-up for your park.
- > Draw on community connections for in-kind donations, such as snacks and water for volunteers, tools, materials, and any other items your group needs for the workday.
- > Compile a list of potential volunteers (from the contact information you've collected) and notify them about the upcoming service day two or three weeks ahead of time.
- > Get the word out to the rest of the community by putting up flyers in the park, nearby at local businesses, community centers, schools and religious institutions. Also send out a calendar listing for the event to your local newspaper.
- > Do an email blast to potential volunteers the day before to remind them about the service day and to wear appropriate attire (clothes they don't mind getting dirty, closed-toe shoes, etc).
- > Plan to have a "Welcome Station" where a group member can greet folks as they arrive, register them with the sign-in sheet (Section 4), and distribute membership materials for your group.

### Day of the Event Reminders:

- > Arrive with enough time to prepare the site for the day's events – nothing worse than volunteers arriving with no one to greet them!
- > Set up your "Welcome Station"
- > Once everyone has arrived, explain the details of your project and delegate tasks. Let volunteers know your approximate finish time and where to meet once they're done working.
- > Direct volunteers toward the designated restroom for the day and where they can find a water source.
- > At the end of the day, remember to thank all your volunteers for their hard work. Let them know when your next workday or meeting will be and encourage them to stay connected to the park.
- > Round up all trash, equipment, and tools.
- > Congratulate yourselves on a successful workday!





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### DO's, Don'ts, and Approval:

Coordinate exactly what you are planning and seek approval from NRP before organizing your service day!

<u>Do</u>	<u>Don't</u>	<u>Ask Approval</u>
Clean up trash and broken glass	Dig Holes	Post Signs
Pick up leaves and sticks	Bring in Loam or Sand	Add Bark Mulch or woodchips
Report rules and regulation violations	Mow/Line Trim	Trimming Branches
Report vandalism	Apply fertilizer or pesticides	Plant trees or flowers
	Post signs without approval	Repair to fences, rails, or walls
		Painting or staining of surfaces



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### Community Programs and Fun Events

Programming and events are a proven way to attract community members to your park. While not everyone in the neighborhood may volunteer to pull weeds or rake leaves, few can say no to a festival, picnic, or get together. Be sure to have a Welcome Table with information on who your group is, when you meet, and your goals for the park. Certain events take more planning and if this is your first time organizing a park-event it is a good idea to start small. A neighborhood picnic is a great way to get people into the park and collect their information with minimal planning on your part. Once introduced to your group, these community members will be connected to future park events.

Successful community events and programs require substantial planning. However the rewards for the park are equally substantial. Events are typically a one-day activity, whereas programs are usually more sustained activities that occur regularly on a weekly, bi-monthly or monthly basis. Many programs are also organized seasonally; for example, a summer picnic. Many friends groups start planning their spring and summer events and programs as early as January. Some groups even plan their entire year in January and publish an annual calendar so the community knows well in advance. However your group decides to plan events and programs, the key is to allow ample time to promote and advertise your activities in order to capture the largest audience.

Events and programs create the opportunity to draw NEW neighbors and partners to the park. Be sure to take advantage of these opportunities to recruit more members from the audiences you draw. During the event: set up a friends group table, display visuals and make announcements to draw attention to your group. Work the crowd: introduce yourself, talk to folks, make more "Friends"!

Notify the local newspaper about your event and invite them to come and do a story. Be sure to take your own photos and share them. Also keep in mind that you get to have fun as well. The more fun you and your fellow friends have at the event, the more fun others will have too.

Important Considerations for Events:

- > **Demographics:** what type of event would be most appropriate for your community?
- > **Timing:** is your event scheduled when the most people can attend?
- > **Permits:** which group member will fill out and submit the Special Events Permit Application for NRP approval?
- > **Frequency:** is it a one-time event, or do you want to have an ongoing series of events
- > **Budget:** what is needed and how will you secure the funding?



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### Our first project was such a success! What now?

Successful service days and events are fantastic, and it is important to do everything possible to keep up the progress. Make your community aware of your success; advertise your accomplishments in the neighborhood newspaper, put it on your Facebook page, share the good news through an email to other organizations working in your community.

To have a lasting impact on your park you must think in the long-term. New projects will regularly arise and you want to make sure you have a reliable base of volunteers. Schedule regular meetings for your friends group to which everyone can comfortably commit. Most importantly, as you grow and expand the reach of your goals, continued coordination with the Natick Recreation & Parks department is critical.

### Promoting Your Park

The more familiar people are with your park, the more attention and involvement you will garner from both inside and outside the community. Hosting community events and regular service days are a great way to heighten awareness of your park and friends group.

With today's ever-growing use of social media, another effective and crucial means of promotion is through the internet. Because everyone has the opportunity to be online now, putting your group out there via the internet is a great choice!

Here are the primary forms of internet communication. At the very least, we feel it is imperative for every friends group to have a generic email to maintain contact with your local partners.

- ☐ **Email:** A generic email address is the *best* choice for your group because it simplifies communication with friends group members and other park volunteers, it protects your personal contact information and more than one group member can monitor and manage emails. As an additional perk, Email addresses through Gmail are completely free! Creating a generic [friendsofXXXXpark@gmail.com](mailto:friendsofXXXXpark@gmail.com) address is an efficient way to manage communication with your members and make your group contact information available to potential volunteers.
- ☐ **Facebook:** Social media is an extremely effective way to communicate with a large number of people. Creating a Facebook page for your group takes minimal effort and allows you to post upcoming events, successes, and have other "friends" post their thoughts on your "wall." A Facebook page will also show up if anyone does a Google search for your park so it's a good first step if you're considering your own website.

Additionally, we will share your contact information on the Town's Webpage for your park.



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### Sustaining Community Involvement

People want to be involved in projects that are interesting and meaningful. Finding the right balance of fun and productivity is critical if you want to keep your community involved. Organizing service days and community events in your park on a regular basis will go a long way in keeping your group active and volunteers coming back.

### Creating Successful Partnerships

Outside of your partnership with Natick Recreation & Parks and Natick Public Works, there are a numerous opportunities for your friends group to collaborate with organizations. Please make sure you discuss your plans to connect with local businesses with Natick Recreation & Parks. The Department has formed several relationships and it is important we do not impact those relationships. Make a list of who you would want to connect with a review with Natick Recreation & Parks. Local businesses, schools, religious institutions and community development corporations who are already part of your community might be a good place to start. Whether the local grocery store donates candy for your Halloween bash or the dog-walking group brings folks out to the next service day, every potential partner has something to contribute.

Strong partnerships are the result of a shared vision developed from everyone doing as much listening as they do speaking. Learning about your partner's interests, concerns and limitations is the first step towards understanding how you can work together. A successful partnership is not always easy and requires a large upfront investment of both time and effort. Each group or organization has its own perspectives, interests and methods of accomplishing its goals, and it is important to keep them all in mind. Beneficial collaboration creates its own energy and produces its own rewards.



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### **Natick Park Friends Group Annual Registration Form**

#### **Group Contact Information**

Friends Group Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Primary Contact Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Contact Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Group Info:**

Do you have regular group meetings? Yes No

If 'yes', please provide the day, time and location for your meetings:

Do you have regularly scheduled workdays? Yes No

If 'yes', please provide day and time: \_\_\_\_\_

Facebook page? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you plan on hosting any events this year? Yes No

You can send it electronically to [recreation@natickma.org](mailto:recreation@natickma.org) or you can print the form and mail or fax it to:

Jon Marshall, Director, Natick Recreation & Parks

179 Boden Lane

Natick, MA 01760

(fax) 508 647-6535

Thank you for taking the time to register your group. We look forward to working with you this year!



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### Parks and Groups

Park Name	Location	Group	Contact Name
Coolidge Park	Chester Street		
East Park	Oak Street		
Grove Park	Pleasant Street		
Henry Wilson Park	West Central Street		
Hunnewell Field	Pleasant Street	N/A	
Indian Burial Ground	Pond Street		
John J. Lane Park	Speen Street		
Loker Park	Walnut Street		
Mary Bunker Park	Megonko Road		
Murphy Park	157 North Main Street		
Navy Yard	Washington Street		
Sargent Field	Oak Street		
Shaw Park	Eliot Street		
South Natick Dam Park	Pleasant Street		
South Natick Courts	Pleasant Street		
Tony Anniballi Park at Pegan Cove	Washington Street		
Town Common	Common Street		
West Hill Park	Mill Street		